The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zi is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each zi below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about blossoming trees

桜
Putonghua pronunciation: ying1
Cantonese pronunciation: ying1
Meaning: cherry-blossom tree, cherry-blossom, sakura

桜 (radical 木 mu4, wood/tree) means 桜花樹 (ying1 hua1 shu4 = cherry-blossom-tree, aka 桜樹 ying1 shu4 = cherry-[blossom]-tree, Japanese sakura), not 桜桃樹 (ying1 tao2 shu4 = cherry-peach-tree = cherry-bearing cherry-tree).

東京 (Dong1 Jing1 = east-capital = Tokyo), 華盛頓 (Hua2 Sheng4 Dun4 = “Wa-shing-ton”-transliterated), 武漢 (Wu3 Han4 = Wuhan) celebrate 賞桜 (shang3 ying1 = viewing-cherry-blossoms = Japanese 花見 hua1 jian4/hanami) season, March-April. TV reports 早桜 (zao3 ying1 = early-blooming-cherry-blossoms), 野桜 (ye3 ying1 = countrysideside-cherry-blossom trees), 霊桜 (cui2 ying1 = hanging-cherry-blossom-branches), 櫻海 (ying1 hai3 = cherry-blossom-sea = mass of blooming cherry-blossom trees), 櫻雨 (ying1 yu3 = cherry-blossom-rain = falling cherry-blossoms).

Japanese eulogize sakura’s 剛剛光輝 (cha4 na4 guang1 hui1 = moment-light/bright-glory = momentary/short-lived splendor).

by Diana Yue